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# Higher Education in the Wesleyan Tradition

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**Higher Education in the Wesleyan Tradition**  
Patrick Allen, Provost: Response to Randy Maddox  
Wesleyan Center Conference: Companions and Apprentices  
Point Loma Nazarene University: February 6, 1999

When Randy Maddox mentioned the Wesleyan concept of *via media* this morning, it struck a cord with me - although not in a way intended by the speaker nor even John Wesley. You see, I am an academic dean of a Wesleyan institution of higher education, and I often feel caught in the middle - or what I call *squeeza media*!! In my work, I find myself standing between students and faculty, between parents and professors, between the church and the curriculum, between the demands for fiscal responsibility and the need for additional resources, between pressure from donors and the need for participative governance, and (sometimes) between the faculty and the president. In fact, I was once told that the job of the faculty is to think for the institution, and the job of the president is to speak for the institution. The job of the dean is to make sure that neither the faculty speak nor the president try to think!

Since my boss, our president, is in the audience, I will hasten to add that what I just told you is a joke at our institution - not a reality . . . but the squeeze is real. As the Chief Academic Officer, I often feel pinched between the demands of my companions and apprentices in higher education - students, parents, donors, accrediting agencies, and sometimes our own Board of Trustees - who know very little about how this academic community is shaped and guided by our Wesleyan heritage, and the demands placed on us by these same companions who interpret our theological tradition - but who talk primarily to and with each other and offer very little that is helpful to academic administrators as we attempt to be faithful to both our academic mission and our theological heritage. Thus, I salute the Wesleyan Center for bringing companions and apprentices together for theological reflection and dialogue, and I congratulate Dr. Maddox for

sharing keen insights about Wesleyan Theology and demonstrating an understanding of how it can and should shape and inform a vital Wesleyan academic community.

I want to briefly discuss three ideas which strike me as particularly important as we think together about higher education in the Wesleyan tradition: discourse, teaching, and outcomes. Then, I will conclude with a story that I hope will illustrate what we are trying to do here at Point Loma.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker social philosopher and keen observer of higher education, suggests that the pursuit of truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and civility.<sup>1</sup> I have come to believe that **discourse** is an essential element in sustaining a vibrant academic community - maybe the key element. It is the wind that powers the academic ship (notice that I didn't say that it was the hot air that lifts the academic balloon - although I have to admit that there is usually enough hot air on most campuses to launch the entire Del Mar Balloon Festival!), and it is a feature that distinguishes strong academic communities from mediocre ones - and healthy institutions from more troubled ones.

I like to think of discourse as the "rare air" on campus. Most students, I have come to believe, show up, take their classes, do their assignments, take their tests, and leave with their diplomas - never having experienced the rich discourse that was taking place all around them. They come to us asking for very little really, and sadly, they often leave getting exactly what they ask for. They are the academic equivalent to world travelers who never get off the tour bus. But for those few students who do experience this true work of the academic community, it is a remarkable thing. They are shaped, stretched, and formed. It is truly life-changing because they have come to know us at our very best.

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<sup>1</sup> From personal conversations with the author and quoted in *To Know As We Are Known: The Spirituality of Education*.

So, why aren't more students invited into the great conversation? Some students are unwilling, some unable, and some just don't care. For others, unfortunately, companions for the journey are missing. Faculty build bridges that students walk across. On many campuses, the discourse among faculty lacks both the scope and depth to be vital. Instead, the driving influence on campus is fear<sup>2</sup> - fear of the administration, fear of the church, fear of the board of trustees, fear of the students, and fear of each other. It seems to me that a vital Wesleyan institution of higher education must find ways to encourage and sustain a rich discourse among faculty, and faculty members must build accessible bridges that companions and apprentices can walk across.

The second idea I want to lift up is **teaching**. To quote Palmer again: "to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced."<sup>3</sup> Wesleyan institutions will need to work hard to ensure that there are spaces within our classrooms and within our institutions where faculty and students are free to practice the community of truth without fear. Without safe places, the process of education breaks down and discourse is impossible. And given our approach to truth, this is critical. Wesleyans approach truth with both confidence and humility. While we are the confident people of one book, we also have the humility to recognize that we do not see all things clearly. Thus, tradition, experience, and reason are companions that shape and guide both our discourse and the authoritative claims we make. This makes for a rich and healthy educational environment.

I like Palmer's notion that good teaching creates spaces where obedience to truth can be quadrilaterally (my word) practiced, but for Wesleyans, this is still incomplete. So let me suggest a Wesleyan version: *to teach is to create a space in which the community of Grace, Truth, and Holiness can be practiced*. If we believe that Christ died for everyone and that God,

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the impact of fear in the classroom, see Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, Ch. II.

<sup>3</sup> From *Teaching & Learning in Community*, About Campus: November/December, 1997.

like the Father in the story of the prodigal, runs to meet us while we are yet a long way off (Prevenient Grace), then our community must be characterized by openness, hospitality, and mission outreach - not because it is “so nice to be nice” but because our theology demands it. And if we understand that our teaching can be a vehicle through which God works, then our work is really grace in action. This calls us to live and work gracefully - in the deepest meaning of the word.

Likewise, if we understand that God calls us to be a holy community, then we are called to be persons of integrity and high moral character, and we are called to be a compassionate and just community where ministry to the sick, the poor, and the disenfranchised is not simply a weekend activity for extra credit. Rather, we carry and seek to address these important issues in tangible ways because our theology compels us to do so.

And our theology compels us to excellence, too. If our work is graceful - a means of appropriating God’s grace, then it demands our very best. I was once asked to choose between two faculty candidates. The first candidate was a wonderful Christian, but a suspect as a scholar and teacher. The second was a top-rate scholar and teacher, but a weak (marginal) Christian. So, which to hire? My response was that we should continue the search until a top-flight Wesleyan scholar could be located - one who was called by Grace, Truth, and Holiness to live and learn faithfully.

Just before my closing story, let me make a brief comment about **outcomes**. What are the hallmarks of a Wesleyan higher education? Put another way, would you be able to recognize a Wesleyan graduate if you met one? Here are a few suggestions: look for *optimism*. If the arms of grace are wide open and God is already at work among us and in us and through us, then we can be optimistic about our work and about the possibilities that exist for those we serve.

Look for a sense of *responsible freedom*. Wesleyan graduates will be inclined to pursue holiness as God's will for their work rather than attempt to find the one true blueprint for their career.

Look for a sense of *hospitality and humility*. Wesleyan graduates will be open to new ideas because they have been shaped by a rich discourse that teaches a respect for the process by which truth is pursued, and by the recognition that learning is a communal act. They will understand that no set of propositional statements can embody all truth.

Look for *character* and a commitment to *social justice*. Their time in our academic community will have helped them to affirm that personal integrity and social action are not optional, but essential aspects of our pursuit of holiness.

And look for a deep *reverence* for the authority of scripture, but not an intolerant insistence on a literal fundamentalism. Wesleyan graduates are not likely to start a creation science institute because an open discourse allowing for reason, tradition and experience provides for an understanding of both scripture and science that does not demand that one be vilified to sustain the other.

Finally, look for *kindness* and a *concern for others* - their well-being, their living conditions, their hearts and minds, their ideas, and their understanding of life. In a Wesleyan educational community marked by a humble but rigorous discourse and courses taught by persons of integrity and competence in spaces where the pursuit of Grace, Truth and Holiness are daily practiced, one cannot help but have an optimism in God's prevenient grace, a humility that acknowledges that we see through a glass darkly, a recognition that the pursuit of truth is an eternal conversation rather than an intolerant insistence on certain propositional statements, a deep and abiding concern for others, and a commitment to living the truth as well as telling it.

### The Promised Story

A few years ago, a student stopped by my office just before commencement. We had become friends on a study trip, and he was wanting to touch base one more time before heading off on a new adventure. He had lined up a job as an auditor in a downtown bank, and was sitting for the CPA exam soon after graduation. I asked him if, since he had a job, he would be satisfied with his undergraduate education if he passed the CPA exam. He told me that passing the exam would make it all worthwhile.

I smiled and told him that he had failed the final examination! Of course, we wanted him to pass the CPA exam, make some money, pay his bills and give some back to the university some day. Of course, we wanted him to be professionally successful, but there were plenty of places to learn accounting. If he didn't leave this place knowing that his life was not his own, knowing that he needed to find a church and community in which to be involved, knowing that he needed to find a way to use his gifts, abilities, and training to serve those in need, and knowing that his work had divine implications, then we did not do a very good job. Not if we are serious about being a Wesleyan university worthy of its name. And as a companion and apprentice in this educational enterprise, I can assure you that Point Loma will settle for nothing less.